

**Congress of the United States**  
Washington, DC 20510

July 28, 2022

Dr. Judy Hayman  
Executive Director  
Montana VA Health Care System

Fort Harrison VAMC  
3687 Veterans Drive  
Fort Harrison, MT 59636

Dr. Hayman,

It has come to our attention that Veterans Health Administration Directive 1193.01 is poised to seriously impede our veterans' access to care.

This directive would unnecessarily extend a vaccine or testing mandate to all VHA volunteers. This concerns us greatly because Montana's volunteers are a lifeline for veterans to receive the health care they have earned. These lifelines are especially crucial to the volunteer transportation services in rural Montana where the VA lacks infrastructure, and any extra requirements placed on drivers only add to the burdensome drive across frontier miles.

It is unfair to keep asking more of these unpaid volunteer drivers. As you and all Montanans are familiar, reaching VA facilities in a state as vast as Montana can be a difficult task, at best. When living with disabilities, it can be impossible without the help of volunteers. One of the complaints we received came from a blind veteran. For him, transportation services are fully necessary, and the community that served him—irreplaceable.

Yet, because of COVID-19 vaccination, masking, or testing requirements, many of these volunteer services will cease or seriously curtail activity on August 1. For instance, Disabled American Veterans will have three drivers to serve 190 veterans in Sanders County. Ravalli County will have six drivers, down from eighteen, to serve 650 veterans—and they are worried about losing at least three more drivers there, and more throughout the state on account of these additional requirements.

We are told that the VA has been recruiting new drivers, but to date, only ten have completed the application process, none of whom are in or near Sanders County. Once these services are lost there is a significant reality that they can never be regained, leaving our veterans to pursue non-VA care, and the VA with a rapidly declining patient base.

We believe that the loss of these and other volunteer services will present a greater threat to veterans' health than the present circulating strains of the COVID-19 virus, which have

mercifully decreased in severity since the early novel virus, and the subsequent alpha and delta variants.

The majority of Montanan veterans served during the Vietnam era and they and many others require vigilant medical follow-up to manage complex health problems. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that veterans are able to make it to their scheduled health care appointments.

We are writing you to ask you, in the interest of Montanan veterans, to exempt critical volunteer services from these requirements to ensure that our veterans do not lose access to their VA care, and to provide answers to the following questions:

- 1.) Directive 1193 is almost a year old, and 1193.01 was issued in January—why is the VA implementing these rules now, and with such short notice to veterans' organizations?
- 2.) For drivers who are unvaccinated, and with a pending or approved vaccine exemption, where will they need to go to get tested for COVID-19?
- 3.) Will these drivers need to make an appointment every time for a test?
- 4.) Will at-home tests suffice, and will the VA provide them?
- 5.) What is the VA doing to recruit more drivers to maintain pre-pandemic levels of service?
- 6.) What has the VA done in partnership with veterans' organizations to provide these services?

The implementation of this policy has deeply disappointed our veteran constituents. They have been given two weeks to prepare alternative transportation arrangements, and do not feel like the VA worked hard enough to fill the vacancies that volunteer drivers will leave.

We ask you to put our veterans before COVID policies. The existing health safety policies that have worked long before the pandemic will continue to work now. We understand that some of these policies may have been implemented for the veterans' benefit, but it is clear that in some cases such as this, the policy stands in opposition to their health interests.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matt M. Rosendale Sr.", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Matthew M. Rosendale Sr.  
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Steve Daines", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Steven David Daines  
United States Senator